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Social Meanings in German Interactions: An Ethnographic Analysis of the Second-Person Pronoun *Sie*

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The German 2nd-person pronoun *Sie* was used as a communicative resource to investigate social meanings in the talk of German native speakers. Two types of data were used for the analysis of social meanings: (a) transcriptions of semistructured, in-depth interviews conducted with 50 German native speakers of varying gender, age, and occupation and (b) field notes from participant observations taken of naturally occurring interactions in public and private spheres over a 10-month period in and around the town of Landau, Germany. A total of 25 social meanings were found to be salient in the talk of the German interlocutors. The results were then used to test the adequacy of 2-, 3-, and even multidimensional explanatory models of social meaning that continue to dominate the current literature. Due to the apparent inadequacy of current models in their representation of both the complexity and distinctiveness of social meanings, the call is made to turn to more interpretive, ethnographic approaches for the discovery of meaning systems. This study suggests the practical utility in examining speakers' and hearers' own situated interpretations

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of their experiences of communicative forms as a means of revealing the rich nuances of social meaning often hidden in our present-day parsimonious models.

For several decades, a central issue in the study of human communication has been how interlocutors express their understandings of their relationships to one another (Bochner, Kaminski, & Fitzpatrick, 1977; Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). These authors, as well as others in a variety of fields, made the point that in human interaction, every communicative act encodes both a referential meaning and a social meaning (the latter is designated by various names; e.g., relational, presentational, or interpersonal meaning). One useful characterization of social meaning was provided by Parkinson (1985), who said that the social meaning of a communicative act expresses "who the speaker believes he is, who he believes the addressee is, what he thinks their relationship is, and what he thinks he is doing by saying what he is saying" (p. 5).

One particularly rich resource for studying social meaning has been the second-person pronoun, particularly as it is used in personal address. Danziger (1976) stated that there are many concrete examples of the presentation of interpersonal relationships in interlocutors' daily communication; however, "the analysis of the rules of personal address probably constitutes the most developed part of this field of study" (p. 38). Indeed, due to the plethora of terms of address studies, with many emphasizing pronouns of address, there is already much known about the uses and functions of the second-person pronoun in social interaction, with studies based on many different languages and societies. For example, following the classic studies by Brown and Gilman (1960) and Brown and Ford (1961), research on personal address has been conducted in a wide range of languages such as Egyptian Arabic (Parkinson, 1985), German (Amendt, 1995; Delisle, 1986; Kempf, 1985), Hindi (Misra, 1977), Icelandic (Haugen, 1975), Italian (Bates & Benigni, 1975), Javanese (Geertz, 1960), Spanish (Fitch, 1991, 1998), Swedish (Paulston, 1976), and Yiddish (Slobin, 1963) to name a few. Developments in terms of address use due to political change has been researched in languages such as Chinese (Zhucheng, 1991) and Iranian-Persian (Keshavarz, 1988). The use of terms of address in political discourse was studied by de Fina (1995) for Mexican and English. Other authors compiled annotated bibliographies of address term research (Philipsen & Huspek, 1985) and produced works that examine various aspects of address theory in different languages (Braun, 1988; Mühlhäuser & Harré, 1990).

One reason theorists have been interested in the personal pronoun is because it has provided a powerful entry point to understanding the dimensions of social relationships. Specifically, in his classic treatise on social psychology, Brown (1965) was one of the first to propose a concrete link between pronouns of address and social meaning. Based on studies of the social meanings expressed in speakers' use of pronouns of address, including the germinal Brown and Gilman (1960), Brown proposed that all expressions of social meaning can be mapped onto a two-dimensional space with the vertical axis being power and the horizontal axis being solidarity.[1] In other words, Brown's theory suggested that there exist two semantic dimensions of social meaning that are universal to all languages and along which all expressions of social meaning can be located in semantic space.

Brown and Gilman (1960) defined the power semantic as asymmetrical. When an imbalance of power is symbolized in speech, it is usually done by those with more power using the informal pronoun and receiving the formal pronoun from those with less power. The solidarity semantic, on the other hand, represents more balance between individuals and is symmetrical. Brown and Gilman wrote: "The similarities that matter [for the solidarity semantic] seem to be those that make for like-mindedness or similar behavior dispositions" (p. 258). Interlocutors often symbolize solidarity in speech by sharing either the informal or the formal pronoun of address with one another.

Other researchers also proposed a two-dimensional model as an effective way to describe how people relate to one another. For example, Birtchnell (1993) proposed a model that includes two axes of relating: the proximity axis and the power axis. The ends of the power axis are *upperness,* "relating from a position of relative strength" and *lowerness,* "relating from a position of relative weakness" (p. 40). The proximity axis is defined by the endpoints closeness or "becoming involved" and distance or "remaining separate" (p. 40).

Although authors such as Brown (1965), Brown and Gilman (1960), and Birtchnell (1993) have been proponents of the two-dimensional model of social meaning, several theorists have challenged its adequacy (see Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Danziger, 1976; Friedrich, 1972; Mehrabian, 1971). These challenges have consistently taken one of two forms. The existing studies that point to the inadequacy of two universal semantic dimensions of social meaning provide either no explicit theoretical challenge based on the data provided, or they provide an explicit theoretical

challenge of the two-dimensional model without basing the challenge in concrete data from observed actual interactions between interlocutors. Also, each of these approaches share in the correlational assumption that when a particular pronominal form is used in a particular context, this results in a fixed and stable social meaning. In other words, "a deterministic relationship [is] assumed between social meaning and personal address choice" (Sequeira, 1993, p. 260).

Despite the various implicit and explicit challenges to two-dimensional theories of social meaning such as Brown's (1965), his particular model continues to be used by researchers. For example, Hudson's (1996, pp. 230–243) *Sociolinguistics,* a prominent work in the area of language and society, devoted a substantial number of pages to Brown and Gilman's (1960) study on the semantics of power and solidarity and described these as semantic universals for languages throughout the world. Foley's (1997) *Anthropological Linguistics* followed suit, providing a lengthy discussion of these as universal dimensions. More specifically, both authors explicitly linked the two dimensions to second-person pronominal use. It would appear, then, that the original semantic dimensions of power and solidarity still hold a prominent place in scholars' theoretical understandings of social meanings and pronouns of address in the languages of the world.

Theorists such as Brown (1965), Birtchnell (1993), Danziger (1976), and others who promoted the notion of "an indexical correlation between the social context of a given linguistic interaction and the linguistic forms used" (Foley, 1997, p. 313), have been criticized for their deterministic view of speakers' communicative choices (Kendall, 1981; Sequeira, 1993). For all the explanatory parsimony that two- or three-dimensional theories provide, they do not account for the varied and nuanced meanings that speakers understand themselves to be negotiating in their daily interactions.

Whereas previous researchers have abstracted from aggregated patterns of use or responses to survey questions about language, other researchers of language and social interaction have been particularly interested in examining the meaning of particular communicative acts to those who use and produce them (Hymes, 1972, 1974; Philipsen, 1992). This has been true, to a limited extent, in studies of personal address, including studies of the use and meanings of second-person pronouns in social interaction (Banks, 1989; Fitch, 1991, 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1989; Sequeira, 1993). Recently, Cameron (1997) advocated that researchers take an alternative to what she called the "correlational fallacy" (p. 59). As have other scholars, she proposed that researchers take as their starting

point an examination of the standpoint of the language user. Many years ago Hymes (1972) called for researchers to examine the "means of speech [. . .] and their meanings to those who use them" (p. 2). Such an interpretive research approach would focus on the variety of meanings speakers bring to their interactions and, in turn, would open up a way to get at the nuanced particulars of social meaning that present-day theories ignore (Philipsen, 1992).

The approaches to social meaning that have most heavily influenced research on the use and functions of second-person pronouns continue to rely most heavily on the correlational, parsimonious models exemplified by Brown's (1965) early approach. Although these approaches have taken us a great way in discovering the social meanings expressed in second-person pronouns, in a variety of languages and societies, our literature does not fully explore speakers' and hearers' own situated interpretations of their experiences of these communicative forms. This leaves open the question of whether there are situated meanings experienced by those who produce and use these forms that are not adequately captured by the dominant explanatory models.

The study reported here responds to this concern by performing a grounded analysis of German speakers' situated experiences of the second-person pronoun *Sie.* In examining what social meanings German interlocutors express and interpret through one linguistic form, we can ultimately reveal the adequacy of our present-day models as guides for making these interpretations. This study stems from a larger research project that explored the social meanings of both the informal and formal second-person German pronouns *du* and *Sie* (Winchatz, 1997). Specifically, the larger study revealed a total of 39 social meanings that were found salient in the talk of German native speakers (i.e., 17 social meanings were found salient for both the pronouns *du* and *Sie,* 8 social meanings were found salient exclusively for the formal pronoun *Sie,* and 14 social meanings were found salient exclusively for the informal pronoun *du*). Although the study reported here takes into account only those social meanings that interlocutors revealed in their talk about the formal second-person pronoun *Sie,* it should be noted that as interlocutors face choices to use one pronoun as opposed to another in interactions, their communicative decisions are always based in their understandings of all of the pronominal choices available to them. Consequently, German speakers' talk about the social meanings they express with the formal pronoun *Sie* is often accomplished by setting up comparisons with and drawing contrasts to

their use of the informal pronoun *du.* However, by focusing on one specific linguistic form available to German interlocutors (*Sie*), rather than two linguistic forms (*du* and *Sie*), a more detailed, focused account of speakers' interpretations of their communicative choices can be provided. Thus, this study provides descriptions and interpretations of the richly nuanced understandings German speakers have of the formal second-person pronoun *Sie,* while simultaneously providing a starting point to test the adequacy of extant models of social meaning.

METHOD

I conducted ethnographic research for a 10-month period (from September 1995 to August 1996), primarily in the town of Landau, Germany, during which I collected both interview materials and participant observations on German speakers' pronoun use. Landau has a population of approximately 40,000 and is located in the southwest region of Germany in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate (*Rheinland-Pfalz*). The town is approximately 25 miles east of the French border and lies between the town of Neustadt in the north and the city of Karlsruhe in the south. In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with 50 German native speakers of varying age, gender, occupation, and class. In addition, field notes from participant observations in both public (restaurants, stores, university classrooms, etc.) and private settings were recorded throughout the 10 months.

The type of interviews conducted for this study are what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) described as "reflexive interviewing" in contrast with "standardized interviewing" (p. 152). In reflexive interviewing, the ethnographer usually enters the interview with a list of particular issues he or she wishes to cover and adopts "a more flexible approach, allowing the discussion to flow in a way that seems natural" (p. 152). Specifically, this means that the ethnographer will not necessarily ask each interviewee the same questions and will not follow any fixed order of topics. Thus, the goal is to uncover participants' understandings and to probe native categories and meanings.

I conducted interviews with single individuals, pairs, and groups, so that there were a total of 24 interviews conducted across 50 participants. The length of the interviews ranged from a minimum of 25 min to a maximum of 1 hr, 50 min each. After responding to initial questions relating to

demographic information, interviewees were asked to think about situations they had encountered in their lives in which the decision of whether to use *du* or *Sie* was a difficult one for them. As an alternate line of thought, I asked for stories of situations in which the participants had, at one time or another, experienced being addressed by another interlocutor with a pronoun that they were not expecting. Once a participant began to recount these mentioned situations, I asked probing questions that ultimately guided the interviewees to express the particular social meanings that they attributed to the pronominal choices of themselves or others. The goal of the probing questions was to use only those terms actually spoken by the participants, as much as possible, without forcing my own terms or meanings on them. The interviews did not consist exclusively of such stories; however, I found that asking the participants to talk about these situations provided them with a helpful theme to guide their discussion of the topic.

The use of interviews for investigating phenomena such as social meanings is often critiqued for only serving as "flawed cues to the system, best ignored or discarded in favor of other forms of evidence" (Hanks, 1993, p. 129). Hanks argued, however,

> If we assume an objectivist stance towards verbal interaction, then native views can never provide more than a deflected representation of the system. If, on the other hand, we assume an interpretive stance, [. . .] then we would expect native talk about talk to reveal principles and schematic resources at play in a wide variety of contexts. (p. 130)

Native speakers do have relatively systematic ideas about the ways they use language and what these uses mean to them. Hanks referred to speakers' "metalinguistic common sense" and by using methods such as interviewing, researchers can get at "direct evidence of [. . . speakers'] interpretive frames" (p. 129).

The researcher who relies on elicitation methods such as interviewing may obscure "the dynamic relation whereby language and context create and reflect social meaning in spontaneous and unpredictable ways" (Mertz, 1993, p. 159). Although Mertz's point is well taken, interview methods can get at native speakers' understandings of what certain linguistic actions mean in certain situations. These native understandings are what guide the intentions reflected in and interpretations of communication in every interaction. Native understandings of the types of expressible social meanings that exist are of great importance to researchers whose goal is to uncover what interlocutors intend to communicate and interpret

others to be communicating to them. Although interviewing is not the only method one can use to uncover a complex phenomenon such as social meaning, and it is not the only approach taken in this study, it is a method that can uncover some very real native participant understandings of communication; that is, speakers' linguistic common sense.

As a second source of materials, I collected field notes of participant observations taken over the 10-month period I lived in Landau, Germany. The notes helped me to make sense of, as well as compare and contrast, the information collected within the interviews. During this period of research, I systematically recorded my observations of German speakers' use of personal pronouns with specific emphasis on any metacommunicative discourse I heard in everyday talk about the social meanings of the personal pronouns *du* and *Sie.* Participant observation is a method that goes hand in hand with ethnography's commitment to "uncovering and depicting indigenous meanings" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 12). When using participant observation, then, the ethnographer's goal is "ultimately to get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities mean to them" (p. 12). Participant observation proved to be an excellent complementary method to interviewing, as I was able to observe firsthand the types of situations that German speakers described in their interviews and compare my observations of everyday communicative behavior to their understandings and descriptions of such behavior.

After obtaining the interview data, all interviews were fully transcribed with a focus on content. Because the goal of this study was to elicit expressions of social meanings, the transcription technique employed allowed for details such as verbal fillers and overlaps to be recorded; however, details such as pause length, elongation of vowels, in or out breaths, and so forth were not transcribed. Each line of the transcriptions was numbered so that tracing of words and phrases that were later extracted from the interview data was possible. This transcription process resulted in approximately 250 pages of transcribed talk.

The interview transcriptions and participant observation field notes were then searched for words and phrases that uttered what the pronouns *Sie* expressed for the participants themselves. This was the only category I had preset before beginning my analysis, and it was my main analytical category. I began the analysis by combing through each line of talk in both data sets (interviews and field notes) two times. With each close reading, I searched for words and phrases from interviews and naturally occurring talk that expressed what the pronoun *Sie* meant to the participants. As I found

these words and phrases, I extracted them from the interviews and field notes and cataloged them in a separate file that included the word or phrase itself, who uttered the word or phrase, and in which interview or field note the utterance occurred. This type of cataloging allowed for cross-checking and tracing of the extracted utterances at later points in the analysis.

As I combed through each interview and field note twice, line by line, for utterances from participants of what the pronoun *Sie* expresses, I noticed other salient categories in the interview materials. These categories were related to my initial, preset search of words and phrases in that they illuminated or expanded on them in various ways. I refined and searched for instances of these new, emergent categories during the first two readings of the two data sets. Once the focus and boundaries of these new categories had been set, I combed through each of the interviews and field notes a third time to make sure that I had collected all the instances available from the materials. During this detailed third reading of the materials, I continued to conduct cross-checks of the categories that guided my analysis to make sure that my cataloging of utterances was complete.

THE SOCIAL MEANINGS SALIENT FOR THE FORMAL PRONOUN *SIE*

In the following, I discuss the expressed and expressible social meanings found salient in the talk of the participants for the formal pronoun *Sie;* that is, what German native speakers understand themselves to be expressing about their relationships when they employ the use of the formal pronoun *Sie* in their daily interactions. When I refer to a social meaning's salience, I refer to the prominence or noticeability of a particular term in the transcribed talk or participant observations, or both, of the participants in this study.

An ethnography of communication approach (Hymes, 1962) emphasizes the discovery of locally managed systems of speaking. Once these systems are located and interpreted, they may be used to help shape larger metatheories of human communication. In the study reported here, an attempt is made to meet both of these goals. First, an overview of the social meanings expressed by German speakers through the use of the formal second-person pronoun *Sie* is provided. Second, the social meanings found for the pronoun *Sie* are then applied to extant models of social meaning to test their adequacy for the German case.

The following 25 expressed social meanings were found to be salient in the talk of the participants for the formal pronoun *Sie*: age, adulthood, anger, arrogance, authority, closeness, coldness, conversableness, dignity, distance, frequency of contact, friendship, intimacy, isolation, knowing other, liking, personal, politeness, power, rejection, relationship, respect, solidarity, status, and structured. In the following, I discuss each of these social meanings in terms of their nuances and values, using verbatim descriptions from the German interviewees and quotes from observed interactions whenever possible.[2] Many narrative examples that were provided by the participants are also included, which allows the reader to place the social meanings into the situated contexts that made them relevant to the speakers.

Age. The pronoun *Sie* can be used to express an age difference between a speaker and the other individual with whom he or she speaks. The speaker is understood to be the point of reference, in that he or she chooses to employ the *Sie* pronoun with another individual by deciding whether the other person is older or younger than him- or herself. In reference to the *age* (*Alter*) of the speaker, a *Sie* pronoun can express that another person is of the same age or older than the speaker.

The participants in this study revealed that they would use the pronoun *Sie* with people who are "older" ("*älter*") than themselves. For example, Janosch, age 24, stated the rule, "Whoever is much older than you are, you have to speak to them with *Sie.*" Some participants also revealed that when they received the *Sie* pronoun from other speakers that they felt "a little bit too old" ("*ein bißchen zu alt*"). This latter meaning was expressed by 40- and 50-year-old participants, as well as participants in their 20s and 30s. It appears that the pronoun *Sie* carries with it a connotation for some interlocutors that one's addressee can be graded in terms of the social category of age.

Adulthood. Adulthood (*Erwachsenenalter*) is related to the social meaning of age. To be counted legally as an adult, one must reach a given age, depending on the laws of a particular country. There is, however, much more to adulthood than simply how old a person is. Adulthood carries with it images of an individual who is grown up, both physically and mentally, allowing for a certain level of maturity to have been reached. When a girl or boy reaches adulthood, there are expectations from society and responsibilities that come along with the territory. If the boy or girl

does not fulfill these expectations or carry out the responsibilities, he or she is most likely still considered a child and not an adult.

For many participants, the formal pronoun *Sie* can be used to express the social meaning adulthood. Many respondents stated such general rules as, "Principally I would speak to an adult person using *Sie*" (Mary, age 54). The need to express that someone is an adult, however, lies close to speakers' wishes to show a younger individual a certain level of dignity that often accompanies becoming an adult.

Johann, age 57, is a high school teacher, who, during his many years of teaching, has used the informal pronoun *du* with many of his students. One afternoon, while accompanying Johann to the store, we met a young woman in her early 20s with whom Johann engaged in a brief conversation. He addressed the woman with *Sie*; however, it was apparent from the conversation that she had previously been his student. Having knowledge of Johann's practice of using *du* with his students, I asked him the reason for his use of *Sie* in this situation. He explained that whenever he met students who had already finished school and graduated, he no longer used the informal pronoun with these ex-students, but rather the formal pronoun *Sie.* Johann stated, "With this [use of *Sie*] I recognize that they are no longer my students, they are adults." There is a figurative rite of passage (e.g., from child to adult) that Johann and many other participants wish to acknowledge to younger people by this particular use of *Sie.* It is a level of accomplishment, deserving of acknowledgment that can only be expressed through the formal second-person pronoun.

Anger. Although the social meaning of *anger* (*Wut*) appears to be expressible mainly through the pronoun *du,* several participants stated that the pronoun *Sie* can, in fact, also be used to express anger. For this to occur, the individuals involved would have to be per *du* with one another; that is, they would have to have the type of relationship in which *du* was an accepted form of addressing the other. This relationship could be one of friendship or membership in a club, for instance, and in a moment of anger, the speaker would use the pronoun *Sie* to express that he or she is so angry with the other individual that the basis for the *du* relationship (e.g., friendship) does not exist at that particular moment. In reference to such an extreme type of situation, Fridolin, age 74, stated: "Yes, there are situations in which you just start to say *Sie* when someone has really gotten you angry" (the 4 other participants present during the interview with Fridolin all agreed with this statement).

It appears that there are two points of reference for the interlocutor's choice of which pronoun to use to express anger at a given moment: the speakers' relationship and the pronoun typically used between the speakers to express this relationship. If the interlocutors are in a relationship in which the informal pronoun *du* is the standard form of address, then a sudden switch to the formal pronoun *Sie* by one interlocutor or both can be understood as an expression of anger.

Arrogance. The term *arrogance* (*Überheblichkeit*) was chosen to portray a compilation of social meanings found in the talk of the participants such as "to act important" ("*wichtig tun*"), "being too confident" ("*zu selbstsicher sein*"), "conceited" ("*eingebildet*"), and so forth. Participants stated that the pronoun *Sie* used by an interlocutor can express arrogance in situations in which the use of *du* would normally be expected. For example, Gila, age 72, said she would expect to continue to say *du* to those she went to grade school with, even if she had not seen them for many years. When a member of her grade school class addressed her with *Sie* at a meeting she attended, she labeled this woman "conceited" because she interpreted the woman's behavior as evidence she thought she was "too good" to be spoken to with the familiar *du* pronoun. Similarly, Frau Richard, age 65, told of a group of people who often spent time together and, due to this, decided among themselves to employ the *du* pronoun with each other. One woman, who had royal blood, according to Frau Richard, would not participate in the group *du* and continued to use *Sie* with the members. Frau Richard stated that the use of *Sie* in this scenario expressed that the woman "thinks she's something better" than the other members of the group.

Arrogance can be expressed in several ways with the formal *Sie* pronoun. Such arrogance was accomplished when an interlocutor used a pronoun that was deemed inappropriate by the other interlocutor, thus resulting in negative evaluations of the first individual.

Authority. For participants, *authority* (*Autorität*) expressed a particular social meaning for the pronoun *Sie* that referred to an individual's control or influence over another individual. The terms "authority" ("*Autorität*") and the phrase "authority structure" ("*Autoritätsstruktur*") were both prominent in the participants' talk.

During my fieldwork in Germany, I worked with a professor in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Koblenz-Landau. The professor and I had previously negotiated the symmetrical use of *du* with one another, which meant that in both social and academic

situations, we spoke to one another using the informal pronoun. On one occasion, however, I was asked to be a guest speaker in his seminar. I was aware that I would be speaking in front of his students, all of whom addressed him either using *Sie* and his first name or *Sie* with title and last name. I was concerned that addressing him with the informal pronoun in a class situation might be uncomfortable for him, his students, or both. When I consulted with a student in the class with whom I had become friends, she suggested that I switch to addressing the professor with the formal *Sie* during the seminar so that it would not "undermine his authority" with his students.

Surely not every German speaker would agree with the advice of my friend. Using the informal pronoun *du* with the professor in this situation would not have been a breach; however, I remained uncomfortable with the situation, and not knowing how to remedy the personal circumstances with the issue of academic authority, I chose to avoid addressing him directly during the seminar.

Closeness. The term *closeness* can be described as persons being strongly united due to a basis or feeling of respect, honor, or love. The social meaning closeness, as it is used in this study, implies a certain level of proximity or lack thereof.

Participants talked in negative terms about the value of closeness as it is expressed through the *Sie* pronoun. *Sie* can be used to express when two people "are not close to one another" ("*Leute, die sich nicht nahe stehen*") or when there exists "no closeness" ("*keine Nähe*") between the interlocutors. In general, the pronoun *Sie* was not thought to express positive levels of closeness to others; rather, the pronoun *Sie* can be used to express when the state of being close does not exist.

The social meaning closeness, even when it is spoken of with negative values such as "lack of" or "no closeness," should not be confused with the social meaning distance. Closeness is a salient social meaning for German speakers, and, in the talk of these interlocutors, lack of closeness was not discussed as a synonym for the social meaning distance, but rather as a separate entity. Therefore, the social meaning closeness (even when it is discussed in terms of its nonexistence) appears to be valued by German interlocutors as a social meaning that is separate and distinct from distance.

Coldness. Several participants expressed that the pronoun *Sie* can display *coldness* ("*Kälte*"). Although this was not a frequently expressed social meaning (three instances were found), it does appear to be an ex-

pressible meaning that is recognizable to German speakers. I consulted my two key informants on this, and both agreed that under certain circumstances, a certain degree of coldness could be expressed by the formal pronoun *Sie.*

Because the *Sie* pronoun is often used between individuals who display "no closeness," "no intimacy," and so forth, it appears that the formal pronoun displays a certain lack of feeling or fondness between two speakers, which can be interpreted as a degree of coldness expressed in talk.

Conversableness. The term *conversableness* (*Gesprächsfähigkeit*) was chosen to represent both the level of a person's ability to converse with another person or the conversational level or type, or both of these. This particular social meaning subsumes a range of expressions concerning the formal pronoun *Sie.* It is important to note that conversableness refers specifically to the activity of speaking or the conversation between interlocutors and not to the context surrounding the interlocutors. Thus, the way I view myself, the person with whom I am speaking, and our relationship, will strongly affect the ways we can or cannot talk with one another.

Participants stated that the formal pronoun *Sie* expresses that the level of speaking between interlocutors is "more thought out" ("*überlegter*"), "serious" ("*ernst*"), "more official" ("*offizieller*"), and "not very spontaneous" ("*nicht sehr spontan*"). Stan, age 48, explained that his way of formulating words also changes when he uses the formal pronoun *Sie*: "In the cases when I use *Sie,* I start to speak more affected. I also start to speak more dynamically, possibly also more strained." Participants did not feel as though they could relax as well in a conversation using *Sie* as when they were using *du,* thus forcing them to give each word more thought and consideration during an interaction.

Indeed, when interlocutors revealed that the use of the formal pronoun *Sie* was concomitant to a speaker having to think about his or her choice of words, topics, and ways of formulating sentences, this condition was often evaluated as a negative result of using the pronoun *Sie.*

Dignity. Dignity (*Würde*) has to do with one's worth as an individual and his or her self-respect. For Mary, age 54, to be able to clearly express dignity to some of her speech-impaired patients is of great importance to her. Mary's patients are often adults who, through an accident or illness of some sort, have acquired a speech impairment that is at times so grave that they have the speaking level of children. Mary explained that in

such cases, she must be careful not to employ the pronoun *du,* as she would with a child, but to speak to the patient as an adult who has "dignity" ("*Würde*"). This can be accomplished for Mary through the formal pronoun *Sie.*

For Helga, age 43, the pronoun *Sie* expresses "the dignity of a human being" ("*die Würde eines Menschens*"). Helga stated, "For me, each individual has a certain dignity, and I respect this dignity in that I don't just use *du* with everyone." Helga's use of *Sie* toward people she does not know well, or who are not her friends, expresses that the other individual has self-worth that should be recognized. For Helga, such dignity cannot be expressed through the informal pronoun *du,* but rather only through the use of the formal pronoun *Sie.*

Distance. The term *distance* (*Distanz, Abstand*) was very prominent in the talk of the participants when describing the social meanings available for the pronoun *Sie.* Specifically, the term distance was expressed by the participants a total of 45 times in reference to the formal pronoun.

Sie can express "distance" ("*Distanz*"), but it can also "keep a distance" ("*eine Distanz einhalten*") that already exists between interlocutors. Participants used many metaphors to express distance as a lack of spatial proximity of one sort or another, which can represent a lack of emotional or relational proximity between interlocutors. One can use the formal pronoun *Sie* to "keep someone at bay" ("*sich jemanden vom Leibe halten*") and *Sie* was also viewed by many participants as a "barrier" ("*Barriere*"). Both of these metaphors have spatial characteristics of maintaining distance between interlocutors and not allowing them to come too close to one another.

Frequency of contact. The term *frequency of contact* (*Kontakthäufigkeit*) was chosen to include how often two people interact with one another and what this says about their particular relationship. For several participants, the pronoun *Sie* expressed that two individuals saw each other only "now and then" ("*ab und zu*") or "occasionally" ("*gelegentlich*").

How often two people interact can reflect the level of commitment that they have to one another. In a relationship in which two people consider themselves close or intimate with one another (a relationship in which the informal pronoun *du* would most likely be employed), there is usually a period of time during which the individuals see each other rather frequently. This can, of course, change, if the two people move to different locations;

however, the basis of the close and intimate relationship was most likely formed during a period in which the two were able to see each other rather often. (Such close, intimate relationships can, and often do, grow apart if the two individuals cannot or do not make time for one another.)

The formal pronoun *Sie* can express that two individuals only meet infrequently; thus, not allowing for the relationship to grow or become close. The social meaning of frequency of contact was not found salient for the informal pronoun *du.* This could point to the possibility that individuals who use *du* with one another do not view how often they meet each other as relevant because it is taken for granted. As soon as the frequency of contact is low, it becomes a salient social meaning, therefore only applying to the formal pronoun *Sie* for German speakers.

Friendship. The term *friendship* (*Freundschaft*) was chosen to subsume the state of having a friendship with another individual and the state of being friends or buddies. Although being "buddies" ("*Kumpel*") may be viewed as a lesser or more superficial form of friendship to some, for the purposes of this study, being buddies is subsumed under the more general social meaning of friendship.

There are certain social meanings for which the pronoun *Sie* can only express the notion that the particular social meaning does not exist. In such instances, the formal pronoun *Sie* does subsume the particular social meaning but only in its negative form. As is the case with the social meaning of closeness, most participants reported that the formal pronoun *Sie* can only express nonexistent states of friendship; for example, the state of "no friendship" ("*keine Freundschaft*").

However, some participants disagreed with the notion that the formal pronoun *Sie* could only be used to express that "no friendship" exists between the interlocutors. While visiting the home of Herr and Frau Richard, I was present for an afternoon get-together for coffee and cake (*Kaffee und Kuchen*) to which Frau Richard, age 65, had invited several women also in their 60s. I noted that Frau Richard addressed these women using *Sie,* although from their conversation, it was evident the members of the group knew each other fairly well. I later asked Frau Richard why she had used the formal *Sie* pronoun with the group rather than the informal *du.* She explained, "I don't use the *du* as easily as my husband . . . I'm alone more than he is, but that doesn't mean that I don't have friends whom I like, and whom I say *Sie* to anyway." The word *anyway* in this sentence points to the usual tendency for people who are friends to say *du* to each other; that

is, although Frau Richard has people in her life she calls "friends" ("*Freunde*"), she addresses them with the formal *Sie* pronoun despite this relationship.

Frau Richard's use of *Sie* to express "friends" may appear to be an exception to the preferred social meaning of *Sie*; however, according to several key informants, older individuals often employ the formal pronoun *Sie* with individuals they would label as friends, without the use of this pronoun representing any lesser form of the friendship. In Frau Richard's case, it is simply a matter of *Sie* being her preferred or standard form of address, and were Frau Richard to use *du* with these friends, this pronoun would most likely imply more intimacy than Frau Richard views appropriate for these relationships.

Intimacy. The social meaning of *intimacy* (*Intimität*) was not as salient as other social meanings in the participants' talk about pronoun use; a reference to intimacy was made a total of seven times in relation to pronouns of address. This may be due to the possibility of speakers counting intimacy as rather similar to closeness. I have chosen, however, to categorize intimacy as a social meaning separate from closeness for two reasons: (a) The term intimacy was, in fact, a salient term in the talk of the participants that stood on its own and was not necessarily employed as a replacement for the term closeness, and (b) intimacy often includes other characteristics, such as affection, that are not necessarily components of closeness.

Once again, *Sie* was found to express a negative value of a particular social meaning. For Georg, age 33, the formal pronoun *Sie* expresses "no intimacy" ("*keine Intimität*"). Although only 1 participant referred to the social meaning of "no intimacy" for the pronoun *Sie,* key informants have agreed that this is an expressible social meaning and not necessarily an idiosyncratic one.

Isolation. According to some participants, the formal pronoun *Sie* can also express *isolation* ("*Isolation*"). To these German speakers, the pronoun *Sie* can be used to actively "isolate" ("*isolieren*") one person from the group, making that individual an "outsider" ("*Außenseiter*").

This was the case for Helga, age 43, when she went to meet her present husband's family for the first time. Everyone in the room said *du* to one another, and only Helga was spoken to with the formal pronoun *Sie.* When asked what this use of *Sie* meant to her, Helga stated, "Isolation—you feel like you're in the wrong place . . . you feel very isolated, and it also hurts somehow." For Helga, when her present husband's family used

Sie with her, this expressed to her that she was isolated from their group and was not welcome to become an insider.

The social meaning of isolation seems to stand in stark contrast to the social meaning of belonging, which was found salient only for the informal pronoun *du.* It is important to note that isolation can only be expressed through the pronoun *Sie* if the group employing this pronoun has based their interactions on a common *du.* Without the contrast of a group *du* to one individual's receipt of *Sie,* the social meaning of isolation, in reference to a pronoun of address, cannot exist.

Knowing other. The social meaning of *knowing other* (*jemanden kennen*) refers to the degree to which one person believes him- or herself to know another person (as opposed to a thing or object). This particular social meaning includes how well or not so well a person can understand another individual's actions or expressed thoughts and feelings, or both, based on how long or how well the person has been acquainted with another.

For German interlocutors, the formal pronoun *Sie* can express that someone is "a stranger" ("*eine fremde Person*"), that he or she is "unknown" ("*unbekannt*"), that the other is "someone you don't know" ("*jemand, den du nicht kennst*"), or someone you "don't know well" ("*nicht gut kennt*"). Once again, it appears that the formal pronoun *Sie* is used by interlocutors to express a negative degree or lack of a particular social meaning. In the case of knowing other, the formal pronoun *Sie* can express that a speaker "doesn't know the person" ("*die Person nicht kennen*") and that the other is an "unknown person" ("*unbekannte Person*") or even a "stranger" ("*Fremder*").

Liking. Although some may argue that *liking* (*Sympathie*) should be subsumed under the social meaning friendship, it was counted as a separate social meaning for two reasons: (a) Liking was a salient social meaning for the German native speakers that was uttered separately from other social meanings, and (b) there are situations in which individuals count one another as friends without necessarily liking each other or one another's characteristics.

In reference to the formal pronoun *Sie,* participants made the social meaning liking salient in their talk. Specifically, *Sie* can be used to express "you don't like each other" ("*man ist sich unsympatisch*"), "I really don't like him" ("*er ist mir sehr unsympatisch*"), and "absolutely no liking" ("*überhaupt keine Sympathie*"). The pronoun *Sie* appears to express only

varied negative gradations and no positive gradations of the social meaning of liking.

Personal. When something is deemed *personal,* it can be understood to pertain to a certain person or that person's character, personality, conduct, intimate affairs, or all of these (Guralnik, 1984). For German speakers participating in this study, the social meaning of personal (*persönlich*) was somewhat salient for the formal second-person pronoun *Sie,* specifically in its negative form.

When German participants spoke of the social meaning personal, they were referring to the characteristics, secrets, or intrigues that one person may or may not share with another. Esther, age 23, said that the formal pronoun *Sie* allows for "absolutely nothing personal" ("*überhaupt nichts Persönliches*") about another person to be revealed. Annel, age 74, also admitted that with certain individuals with whom she has used the formal *Sie* pronoun, "the personal part was then missing" ("*das Persönliche hat dann gefehlt*"), and this pronoun can even be deemed "too impersonal" ("*zu unpersönlich*") at times.

Politeness. When one person shows good manners toward another person, is courteous, or considerate, this person may be labeled polite. Participants in this study stated that when the formal pronoun *Sie* was employed by one speaker to another, the social meaning of *politeness* (*Höflichkeit*) may be a component of what is being expressed between the two interlocutors.

Many participants stated this general rule: "I always speak to strangers with *Sie*" (Frau Richard, age 65). The use of *Sie* when speaking with strangers would be labeled by most German speakers as a convention; however, when asked what the pronoun *Sie* addressed to strangers expresses, participants such as Anna, age 31, stated that this particular *Sie* expresses a "basic courtesy" ("*Grundhöflichkeit*") toward the stranger.

Rudi, age 36, stated that if he were to meet someone older than himself, he would use the formal *Sie* pronoun "out of politeness" ("*aus Höflichkeit*"). For Rudi, *Sie* also signals that the level of conversation is "polite" ("*höflich*") and not "buddylike" ("*kumpelhaft*"). Herr Schuster, age 78, also insisted that there is a "certain politeness" ("*eine gewisse Höflichkeit*") expressed to the other person when *Sie* is used. For Herr Schuster, the formal *Sie* is necessary to speak to those whom he does not know, but toward whom he wishes to be considerate and courteous.

Power. To fully understand the social meaning of *power,* it is the point of reference for German interlocutors that must be taken into account. According to the German speakers with whom I have spoken and my own personal experience while living in Germany, it is assumed that if two individuals employ the same pronoun (*du–du* or *Sie–Sie*) with each other, they are, generally speaking, on equal ground with one another; that is, one speaker does not necessarily have power (the ability to influence another individual) over the other. If, however, there is an asymmetrical use of pronouns between the two individuals (e.g., one person receives *Sie* but may say *du*), this can point to a difference in power between the two individuals, although this difference in power is not an automatic product of asymmetrical pronoun use.

For example, if a boss were to demand that a secretary use only *Sie* with him or her, but in return, takes the liberty of saying *du* to the secretary, this can point to the exertion of power by the boss over the secretary. In such a scenario, the pronoun *Sie* can express power, when one assumes the reference point of the secretary. When the secretary says *Sie* to the boss, he or she defers to the power of the boss. In comparison, when the boss employs the pronoun *du* when speaking with the secretary, the *du* is an assertion of the boss's power.

Asymmetrical pronoun use between two individuals can, in some situations, express power differences between the speakers. Within the realm of asymmetrical pronoun use, both the formal pronoun *Sie* and the informal pronoun *du* can express the social meaning of power depending on the respective reference point. It should be noted, however, that in this study, the social meaning of power was found most prominently in interlocutors' talk about the formal pronoun *Sie* rather than *du.*

Rejection. For one person to reject another person, a denial or nonacceptance of the other person must occur. The rejected individual is unwanted and, metaphorically, discarded by either a group or another person. Such *rejection* (*Ablehnung*) can be accomplished in various ways. According to some participants in this study, rejection can be expressed through the formal pronoun *Sie*—a social meaning that was not found for the informal pronoun *du.*

Rudi, age 36, described a colleague at his workplace with whom he had fairly quickly developed a relationship in which the informal *du* pronoun was used in interactions. When Rudi's colleague moved to a higher position, however, this colleague began using the formal pronoun *Sie* with

Rudi, as he had when they had first met. Rudi stated, "I've never experienced anything like it, that someone goes back to *Sie* after having said *du*—and at first I thought—what a jerk." Rudi later stated that he found the whole situation very odd, and he interpreted this particular use of *Sie* as one that expressed his colleague's rejection of himself.

The social meaning of rejection was often found salient in similar contexts as isolation. The main difference between rejection and isolation for the German speakers I interviewed was whether the action stemmed from a group or an individual. It appears that a group can isolate a single individual by using the formal *Sie* to place them outside of the circle of membership of that group. When the action stems from one individual, however, this is viewed as an expression of the social meaning of rejection of one person toward another. It appears difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to isolate another individual unless the membership of a group is at stake.

Relationship. The pronoun *Sie* can also be employed by German speakers to express a certain type of relationship (*Beziehung*) between two individuals. The term "relationship" ("*Beziehung*") is highlighted here because this was the term that was consistently salient across the participants' utterances. There are, however, various types of relationships that each pronoun can express according to the participants in this study.

The social meaning of relationship was only minimally salient in German speakers' talk about the formal pronoun *Sie.* In the three instances found, the relationship expressed by *Sie* was "a business relationship" ("*eine geschäftliche Beziehung*"); that is, the type of relationship that exists between a salesclerk and a customer, or the relationship between two individuals working together in a company. The relationship expressed by the pronoun *Sie* was one that was defined by its context or the place in which the relationship was formed and maintained; that is, in a business. Speakers said nothing about the types of interpersonal feelings associated with this relationship, as was the case for the *du* pronoun, in which case speakers described their feelings of closeness, intimacy, warmth, and so forth with the other individual.

One could argue that each of these expressions should not be considered under the social meaning of relationship, but rather they should be categorized according to the adjectives used to describe the relationship; for example, a "closer relationship" (found only for the informal *du* pronoun) should be counted under the social meaning of closeness and not re-

lationship. It appears, however, that speakers identify the relationship they have with another individual as an important and salient component to their interpersonal lives; that is, the relationship is a recognized unit with boundaries that can be identified and described. For this reason, relationship has been categorized as an individual, salient social meaning that can be distinguished from other social meanings that have emerged in the talk of the participants of this study.

Respect. There were 26 instances of the social meaning *respect* (*Respekt*) found for the formal pronoun *Sie.* Respect can be viewed as one's admiration for, honoring of, or deference toward another individual, the state of being esteemed or admired by another, or both.

Most of the participants stated that *Sie* can express "respect"; however, included under the social meaning respect are two mentions of "appreciation" ("*Anerkennung*") displayed toward another individual and one mention of "esteem" ("*Wertschätzung*") granted to another person through the use of the pronoun *Sie.* A few individuals also placed the respect that the *Sie* pronoun can express in a less neutral context. Jakob, age 37, spoke of a "basic respect" ("*Grundachtung*") that a person would have for a stranger; to express this type of respect, Jakob would use the formal pronoun *Sie.* Helga, age 43, described her use of *Sie* to express "a respect for younger people." In this particular case, Helga was referring to the fact that many Germans, after reaching a certain age, address younger people (adolescents) with the informal *du* pronoun, expressing the social meaning of age or age difference. Helga, however, attempts to use the pronoun *Sie* with these younger people to show them her respect for their individuality and adulthood; that is, they are not lower than she is, or undeserving of respect, simply because they are younger. Finally, *Sie* can be used to show that one "really respects" another individual (Berthold, age 55)—this respect is of a higher level than the basic respect expressed by most participants for the pronoun *Sie.*

Solidarity. A feeling of *solidarity* (*Solidarität*) can exist when an interest outside of the self is held common to more than one individual. It is a feeling of unity or commonality between people that can be based on group membership. It is important to note that solidarity is grounded on something outside of the relationship between the two individuals (e.g., a group, organization, club, etc.) and is not based on the mutual penetration of individuals' psychological worlds, as is often the case in a friendship.

Solidarity is most often expressed through the informal *du* pronoun. According to the German participants in this study, the formal *Sie* can only express degrees of nonsolidarity. For instance, one participant stated that *Sie* can express that "he is not a part of the common cause" ("*er gehört nicht zur gemeinsamen Sache*"). Stan, age 48, commented that this form of nonsolidarity reveals that there exists a common cause that binds everyone except the person or people with whom we use the formal pronoun *Sie.*

Walter, age 49, revealed an example of this nonsolidary *Sie* when he described his days of playing handball on a team when he was in college. All of the members of the team and the coach said *du* to one another. Many of the participants in this study explained that the common *du* is usually employed in sports because the team members are all bound together by the sport or to win the game—both are forms of solidarity. Walter explained that, although the team members and the coach used *du* with one another, everyone involved said *Sie* to the referees. The referees were not members of the team, and they were not bound to the team members through a common cause. They were there to judge the team, to give or take away points, and for this reason they were spoken to by the team members with a nonsolidary *Sie.*

Status. The term *status* (*Status*) was chosen to represent expressions of social meaning referring to the position, level, or rank of one individual in comparison to another. Whether a speaker views the other individual with whom he or she is speaking as inferior, equal, or superior to him- or herself can be expressed through pronominal use.

In the case of status, the reference point of the person speaking is of importance. When two speakers are employing a symmetrical use of *Sie* with one another, this use can express a certain equality between the two individuals; however, the level is often viewed as one that is an "official level" ("*offizielle Ebene*") as, for example, the "social level" ("*das soziale Niveau*") between an employee and a customer. Within the realm of asymmetrical use—that is, one person says *du* to another, whereas receiving the *Sie* pronoun in return—the person receiving the pronoun *Sie* might view the individual to whom he or she says *du* "in low regard" ("*Geringschätzung*").

Structured. The term *structured* (*strukturiert*) was chosen to embody a variety of expressions made by various participants in reference to the overall atmosphere of an interaction between two interlocutors, which, in turn, often has an effect on the manner in which the speakers discur-

sively deal with one another. In other words, the momentary relationship that two people have with each other during an interaction has much to do with the level of conversation and the general atmosphere surrounding the conversation at the time. The conversational atmosphere has an effect on the relationship of the speakers and vice versa.

Various comments were made by interviewees concerning *Sie* and what this pronoun can express or create between two interlocutors. For example, Ludwig, age 24, believed that *Sie* expresses "something official" ("*etwas Offizielles*") about the situation at hand. Hartmut, age 30+, agreed with this characterization of the pronoun *Sie* by stating that there is something "more formal" (interview in English) about a conversation conducted using this pronoun.

Georg, age 33, said that when the pronoun *Sie* is used in a conversation, the atmosphere is "stiffer" ("*steifer*"), and, at times, everything seems "more complicated" ("*komplizierter*") than when the informal pronoun *du* is employed. He added that, for him, the pronoun *Sie* expresses that "everything here is well ordered" ("*hier ist alles wohl geordnet*") and "everyone here has his place" ("*hier hat so jeder seinen Bereich*"). Stan, age 48, added to this notion by stating that *Sie* expresses that a level of "discipline" ("*Disziplin*") is also expected from the interlocutors.

The social meaning of structured expresses something about the interaction itself and the momentary relationship between the interlocutors. The formal *Sie* appears to have an effect on the way speakers view a situation and what type of behavior is expected from them when interacting with other speakers. The social meaning structured reflects an orderliness and lack of spontaneity within an interaction; thus, strongly affecting the ways in which interlocutors view one another.

THE GERMAN CASE AND BEYOND: TESTING THE ADEQUACY OF EXTANT MODELS OF SOCIAL MEANING

Given the account that I have provided of how Germans talk about their uses of and interpretations of *Sie,* there appear to be two possible directions that an interpretation of the German case could take. The first of these would display how the social meanings for *Sie* could be subsumed

by the more parsimonious models of such scholars as Brown and Gilman (1960), Birtchnell (1993), Friedrich (1972), Danziger (1976), and others. To take this first direction would be to argue that the findings for the German social meanings of *Sie* can be mapped onto a two- or three-dimensional model of meanings. Let us examine what happens when the German social meanings found are applied to such parsimonious models.

The classic Brown and Gilman (1960) two-dimensional model (supported also by Hudson, 1996) claims that all social meanings in every language can be mapped somewhere onto the vertical axis of power or the horizontal axis of solidarity (see also, Birtchnell, 1993). Indeed, there are many of the 25 social meanings of *Sie* that can be subsumed under either of these axes. For example, one could make the case that such social meanings as *authority, power,* and *respect* could be mapped onto the power axis, and *relationship, rejection,* and *solidarity* could be mapped onto the solidarity axis, among others.

The task becomes more complicated, however, when one attempts to subsume, for example, the social meanings of *intimacy, conversableness,* and *structured* under these two axes. Solidarity can be described as a feeling of unity or commonality between people that can be based on group membership. Intimacy, on the other hand, refers to individuals being united by something they hold between each other—for example, affection for one another—rather than through a commonality outside of the relationship. Therefore, although solidarity and intimacy could, theoretically, coexist, solidarity does not subsume intimacy, as is the case in the Brown and Gilman (1960) two-dimensional model. The social meanings of conversableness and structured, according to German speakers, refer to the conversational level, type, or atmosphere between speakers using the pronoun *Sie.* These social meanings do not fit neatly onto either the power or solidarity axes but appear to stand outside of both of these dimensions.

I have provided only a few examples of German social meanings that prove difficult to map onto a parsimonious two-dimensional model. It appears that each of Brown and Gilman's (1960) dimensions includes so many poorly defined variations or aspects of interpersonal relationships that those social meanings German speakers understand to be distinct and separately meaningful can hardly be distinguished in such a model. Brown (1965) pointed to this particular issue himself, when he characterized his use of the terms solidarity and power as "maximally general" and went on to write: "We need some scheme for classifying relations more narrowly, a scheme that will help us to see regularities and to understand them" (p.

73). Perhaps the simplicity of the Brown and Gilman model aided its continued use by various researchers in recent publications (e.g., Hudson, 1996); however, when a model's simplicity stands in the way of its ability to represent important distinctions and complexities of communicative practices, such a model's theoretical import must be called into question.

There have been attempts to make the classic two-dimensional model more complex by adding a third dimension. Friedrich (1972), for example, in his study of Russian personal pronoun use, called into question the adequacy of the power and solidarity dimensions by separating intimacy as a third dimension. This separation allows such German social meanings as *closeness, friendship, isolation, liking,* and perhaps even *knowing other* to be more easily accounted for, as these are not necessarily aspects of solidary relationships but rather more often come into play when interlocutors share something between each other (rather than outside the relationship; e.g., a common interest) and have penetrated one another's interpersonal worlds.

Although Friedrich (1972) did make the important move to distinguish solidarity and intimacy as two distinct meanings that cannot be represented in the same dimension of semantic space, his model continues to combine other distinct social meanings, such as *power* and *status,* as is also the case in the Brown and Gilman (1960) model. Although power and status can go hand in hand, a person who has higher status than another individual does not necessarily have power to influence that individual (e.g., the chief executive officer of one company has higher status but no power over a manager in another company). Furthermore, those German social meanings relating to the atmosphere or conversational level between interlocutors (e.g., conversableness and structured) also appear to have no place in Friedrich's three-dimensional model. Thus, Friedrich's addition of intimacy as a third dimension does move us toward a model that can more readily account for the distinctiveness of complex meaning systems; however, even three dimensions cannot account for all of the social meanings found for the German case.

In taking the first possible direction of interpretation, I have been able to show that to a great extent the more parsimonious models can account for the data I have assembled for the German formal pronoun *Sie.* However, I have also shown that some of the German data do not fit neatly into such models. For example, the meanings of conversableness, status, and structured would have to be force fit into even a three-dimensional scheme. When one examines the German data even further, it would in-

deed be difficult to map such meanings as age, adulthood, anger, and even dignity onto a two- or three-dimensional model.

It appears, then, that a second direction must be taken in accounting for the data I have presented—a direction I now turn to. Communication scholars Burgoon and Hale (1984) argued against those models that have narrowed interpersonal behavior down to two or three basic dimensions:

> Although the parsimony achieved by these reductive perspectives is certainly desirable for many purposes, a danger in completely embracing them to account specifically for the class of behavior called relational communication is that it may promote an unduly narrow, simplistic view of relational communication content. It may mask the diversity of relational message themes, or topoi, that are possible and may lead to an underestimate of how much relational meaning is present in a typical exchange. (p. 194)

Burgoon and Hale (1984) argued that interlocutors can express their relational messages along 12 distinct but interrelated themes. Burgoon and Hale (1987) exposed this set of 12 relational themes to empirical verification and narrowed them to 8 separate relational dimensions: immediacy–affection (intimacy I), similarity–depth (intimacy II), receptivity–trust (intimacy III), composure, formality, dominance, equality, and task orientation.

Thus, Burgoon and Hale (1987) moved away from a more parsimonious model relying on only a few dimensions to a model allowing for more complexity and distinctiveness between meanings to emerge. When the data from the German case are applied to Burgoon and Hale's (1987) eight-dimensional model, many of the German meanings can be accounted for (i.e., authority, closeness, coldness, conversableness, distance, friendship, intimacy, knowing other, liking, politeness, power, status, and structured). The force of this model is that it allows each social meaning to be represented by dimensions that are more narrowly defined, thus allowing for finer distinctions to be made between meanings. Despite the model's strength, however, there remain almost half of the German meanings that do not fit neatly into one of the previously mentioned dimensions; that is, adulthood, age, anger, arrogance, dignity, frequency of contact, isolation, personal, relationship, rejection, respect, and solidarity.

Burgoon and Hale's (1987) work appears to be on the right track to providing a model that has a sound communication focus and attempts to account for the complexities of social meaning in interpersonal interactions. Unfortunately, although the authors attempted to provide more com-

plexity of semantic dimensions, there remain many of the German social meanings that cannot be accounted for by their model.

Having conducted tests of two-, three-, and even eight-dimensional models of social meaning with data from the German case, one may ask if available theories for interpreting social meanings (e.g., Brown, 1965; Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Friedrich, 1972) provide a useful starting point in making those interpretations. The answer to this question is not a definitive yes or no. Current theories of social meaning are quite helpful in directing us to certain universal dimensions of meaning that are expressed through pronominal use in various languages. However, as I have displayed, these models cannot completely account for German interlocutors' situated expressions and interpretations of the formal pronoun *Sie.*

Not only are many of the German meanings left unaccounted for in the various models tested, but the possibility of multiple meanings expressed simultaneously in interaction also remains hidden in these models. Each time an interlocutor utters the *Sie* pronoun, he or she expresses a variety of social meanings at once. Thus, the combination of social meanings will vary, as well as the weight given to each social meaning, every time the utterance of a particular pronoun occurs. Such variations in the combinations and weighting of social meanings depend on the particular communicative context and, specifically, the relationship between the interlocutors.

It appears, then, that the extant models of social meaning provide a useful guide; however, they mask much of the distinctive particularity of social meanings between interlocutors and the possibility for multiple meanings to be expressed simultaneously. This insight seems to beg the question, what type of model can include all of the social meanings available to interlocutors without sacrificing the representation of each social meaning's distinctiveness and complexity?

Perhaps the answer lies in moving away from determinate, parsimonious schemes that claim universality to more interpretive, ethnographically based ones. Kendall (1981) argued that most semantic theories are "formulated without reference to speaker's *intent* or addressee's *interpretation* of speaker's intent" (p. 237). The study reported here explicates a culturally distinct system of meaning for a particular communicative resource as expressed and interpreted by the interlocutors themselves. No attempt was made to force various components of the system into a more economic scheme of several larger categories, for this move toward parsimony only masks the distinctiveness of each component and the complexity of the system as a whole.

It appears that by starting with grounded, ethnographic data of speakers' communicative choices and their interpretations of these that we can come to better understand the distinctive and complex systems of interpersonal relating that underlie daily interactions. Certainly, Burgoon and Hale's (1987) work began to move us away from models that represent interpersonal relating with only broad, poorly defined dimensions toward a schema that allows the intricacies of human communication to be better accounted for. Indeed, such an interpretive approach allows us to move from a causal, deterministic, theory-driven view of interpersonal relating to one that works from the ground up, from data based in interlocutors' meanings and interpretations of their own communicative choices to theories that remain faithful to interlocutors' intricate meaning systems.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an overview of the various social meanings available to German speakers through the use of the formal German pronoun *Sie.* The results point to 25 distinct social meanings that German speakers understand themselves to be expressing through their pronominal choice to say *Sie* instead of the informal pronoun *du.* Further research in this area would most likely uncover other social meanings that are not accounted for in this study, and it is through such continued research that a fuller understanding can be gained of what German speakers accomplish socially through specific communicative choices. This study provides a solid framework for future research both in the German context and for comparative studies of other languages.

One limitation of this study is that it took only limited account of participants' gender, age, social class, place of residence, and dialect as factors that may have affected the social meanings found. Indeed, the attempt was made to represent equally gender, age, and occupation through the sampling of interview participants; however, the majority of participants in this study grew up in and spoke the dialects of the Rhineland-Palatinate region. The possibility exists that certain region-specific or dialect-specific social meanings may not be expressed by speakers in all areas of Germany, thus limiting the generalizability of some of the social meanings found here.

There may be certain regions in Germany in which some of the 25 social meanings are expressed rarely during interactions, if at all; however, this does not challenge the fact that the 25 social meanings found in this study generally remain available resources to all German speakers. This study does not focus on the question of how often a particular social meaning is expressed by German speakers, but rather, the goal was to discover what social meanings are available to German speakers for expression. Indeed, of the research known to me at the present time, this study has provided the most extensive summary of social meanings of any study concerning German pronoun use thus far.

In sum, the analysis of native speakers' metapragmatic talk about their communicative choices proved to be a rich resource for uncovering interlocutors' "means of speech [. . .] and their meanings to those who use them" (Hymes, 1972, p. 2). Ultimately, studies such as the one reported here can better inform our current models of interpersonal communication, forcing future theoretical development to match the results of grounded, ethnographic research. Claims of universality can be tested rigorously with concrete data, pointing instead to the possibility of culturally distinct systems of social meaning. In the end, research in this area can expand our knowledge of the links between culture and communication, resulting in the possible enhancement of cultural understanding between individuals and societies.

NOTES

1 It should be noted that Brown (1965) appeared to be one of the first authors to propose a link between the two-dimensional spatial model of social meaning and pronouns of address; however, there exists a long history of literature pertaining to the spatial model prior to Brown. This history is based in the works of such authors as Bateson (1935, 1958); Eysenck (1954); Leary (1957); Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957); and Schutz (1966), among others.

2 I have formally studied the German language for 9 years in the United States and 6 years in Germany. I have completed a translation certification program from Rutgers University in New Jersey (1988) and have been employed as a freelance translator. I am responsible for all translations presented in this study. When providing translations from German to English, I attempted to take into account certain stylistic considerations; for instance, idiomatic expressions were not literalized, but rather corresponding English idiomatic expressions were provided whenever possible. Finally, I attended

to but did not seek to provide English equivalents for any dialectical or non-normative level utterances.

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